Being Successful and Being Thin: The Effects of Thin-Ideal Social Media Images With High Socioeconomic Status on Women's Body Image and Eating Behaviour

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Social media has outpaced traditional media to be the most popular sociocultural channel to transmit thin-ideal images, an established trigger for body image concerns and disordered eating in women. With an experimental design, the present research first demonstrated that exposure to thin images on social media threatened women's body image and increased their unhealthy food consumption (Study 1). However, given that thin images posted on social media are usually from wealthier people, the present research hypothesised that it may not be the body shape but the perceived socioeconomic status (SES) of images that indeed have negative effects on women. By manipulating the perceived SES of thin images and incorporating a baseline control group (Study 2), the present research provided causal evidence for the hypothesis by indicating that viewing thin images with parallel-perceived SES could significantly buffer undesirable thin-ideal effects on self-objectification and food intake. Therefore, future research needs to pay more attention to the role of SES in the thin media images literature.

Keywords: thin-ideal image, socioeconomic status, food intake, social media

Research on the psychological impact of using and being exposed to social media is a relatively novel area of research that is gaining momentum. An emerging literature has indicated the potential harmful influence of social media on women's body image and eating behaviour (e.g., Tiggemann & Slater, 2013). The present research aims to shed light on the role of socioeconomic status (SES) in the thin media images literature. Specifically focusing on the context of social media, the present research conducted two experiments to investigate whether thin images would negatively influence women's body image and food intake (Study 1), and whether parallel-perceived SES of the thin image could temper its negative effects (Study 2).

Before the advent of social media, the majority of research in thin media images literature investigated the influence of exposure to idealised bodies in traditional forms of media, such as magazines and advertisements (Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008). According to social comparison theory (Buunk & Gibbons, 2007), women who make up-ward shape-based comparisons with thin ideals tend to feel worse about themselves, as the extremely thin beauty ideal today is more unattainable than ever (Diedrichs & Lee, 2011). Meta-analyses of correlational and experimental research have shown that exposure to thin-ideal media images is generally related to poorer body image outcomes, such as heightened body dissatisfaction (Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002) and self-objectification (Harper & Tiggemann, 2008), both of which are high risk factors for disordered eating (Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2007).

The development of the mobile internet and smart phones brings about the advent of social media (Hew, 2011). Social media often refers to the websites and applications that enable users to create and share content with networks — that is, friends, followers, and so on (Pittman & Reich, 2016). Unfortunately, increasing research elucidates that social media reinforces the merging of thin images linked to body image disturbance and disordered eating in non-clinical samples (Holland & Tiggemann,

2016). Preliminary correlational research has established small but significant associations between social media use and thin ideal internalisation (Tiggemann & Slater, 2013), body dissatisfaction (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2015), and disordered eating (Meier & Gray, 2014) among non-clinical adolescent girls and young adult women. Longitudinal findings reinforce that maladaptive Facebook use (the tendency to seek negative evaluations and engage in social comparison) predicted increases in bulimic symptoms, body dissatisfaction, and shape concerns in college women (Smith, Hames, & Joiner, 2013). Furthermore, a handful of experimental studies have found that even the non-maladaptive use of Facebook would increase weight/shape concerns, state anxiety, and disordered eating in female college students (Mabe, Forney, & Keel, 2014).

Social media, as mentioned above, has become a new sociocultural channel to transmit unrealistic thin images, and may trigger body image and eating problems for women. Therefore, the present research conducted an experiment to investigate whether exposure to thin images on social media would harm women's body image and increase their unhealthy food consumption (Study 1). The present research assumed that women viewing thin images on social media would have lower body appreciation and weight satisfaction, and higher self-objectification and more food intake, relative to a control condition.

More importantly, SES is a noteworthy but often overlooked factor in thin media images literature. SES refers to social standing that reflects wealth, occupational prestige, and education levels (Cardel et al., 2012). The perception of others' high SES is a psychosocial stressor that negatively alters health-related behaviours (Demakakos, Nazroo, Breeze, & Marmot, 2008). In reality, most of the thin images posted on social media by people such as actresses, models and celebrities not only conform to the socially approved thin ideal but also have high-perceived SES. Therefore, according to social comparison theory (Buunk & Gibbons, 2007), when ordinary women are exposed to these images, they can suffer from upward comparison of both shape and SES. However, previous research in thin media images has overemphasised the harmful effect of shape-based comparison and paid little attention to the role of SES.

There is an increasing amount of evidence to suggest that women with relatively low SES tend to exhibit more signs of overeating (Gard & Freeman, 1996), which has been mentioned as a factor contributing to obesity (Goodman, Maxwell, Malspeis, & Adler, 2015). On the one hand, SES differences shape food choices, especially the consumption of energy-dense and high-fat food (Nilsen, Krokstad, Holmen, & Westin, 2009; Thrane, 2006). Unhealthy foods are significantly associated with low-income consumers (O'Doherty & Holm, 1999; Hulshof, Brussaard, Kruizinga, Telman, & Löwik, 2003). On the other hand, since some women use food to keep their mind off life events and difficulties, overeating has become a gen-

eralised response to stress (Parker & Keim, 2004). Therefore, under social comparison theory (Buunk & Gibbons, 2007), women with a relatively low SES usually make upward SES-related comparisons that seem associated with more opportunities to overeat unhealthy foods.

To date, the evidence regarding the correlation between SES and body image concerns continues to be debatable (Maruf, Akinpelu, & Udoji, 2014). Some research has indicated that teenage girls from a lower SES experienced less body dissatisfaction (Schneider et al., 2013) and may have more bias in weight status estimation (Wronka, Suliga, & Pawlińskachmara, 2013). Research on young adult women, particularly those with a comparatively high SES, revealed the similar positive relationship between SES and body dissatisfaction (McLaren & Kuh, 2004). Nevertheless, other studies asserted that SES differences in women's body dissatisfaction were rather small (Matthiasdottir, Jonsson, & Kristjansson, 2012; Thomas & Andreas, 2012). Therefore, whether upward SES-related comparison with thin media images experienced by women from a relatively low SES will do harm to their body image should be further investigated.

Based on the above literature, the present research conducted another study to examine whether lateral SES-related social comparison with thin images could buffer the potential harmful influence of upward shape-related comparison with thin images on women's body image and eating behaviour. Lateral comparison occurs when people compare themselves to those who are perceived to be the same in a particular domain (Harris, Anseel, & Lievens, 2008; Sohn, 2010), which generally has positive effects (Wheeler & Miyake, 1992). In Study 2, the present research hypothesised that women exposed to thin images with parallel-perceived SES on social media would experience more body appreciation and weight satisfaction, and have less self-objectification and unhealthy food consumption than women exposed to thin images with high-perceived SES. Moreover, women exposed to thin images with parallel-perceived SES may not differ from the control group in these variables.

STUDY 1
Method
Participants

Sixty-four women aged 18–23 years (*M* age = 20.78, *SD* = 1.46) were recruited to take part in this study (*n* thin images group = 32; *n* control group = 32). All participants were undergraduates at East China Normal University and maintained a WeChat account.

Tools

WeChat. The present research utilised WeChat, the most popular social media in China (CNNIC, 2016), to expose participants to thin images and control images. WeChat (or 'WeiXin' as it is known domestically in China), first released by Tencent in 2011, provides a mobile

communication service via texting, voice, and mobile social networking (Wikipedia, 2013). WeChat users can release texts and pictures in their friend space (i.e., Moments), and comment or 'like' others' posts. Such services provided by WeChat are similar to those of Facebook and Facebook Messenger (Zhang, Li, Wu, & Li, 2017). Compared to other social media, the distinctive characteristic of WeChat lies in embedded local public services such as the verification of a person's traffic violation records and real-time traffic condition ('Government WeChat services', 2015). WeChat has rapidly become an integral part in Chinese people's daily life (Lien & Cao, 2014), and reached an active monthly users group of 762 million (Tecent, 2016).

Materials

Thin-ideal images and control images. Forty-five thin images selected from a female online celebrity and 45 product-only pictures were retrieved via Baidu, which is the No. 1 search engine in China (Baidu, 2017). All the thin images featured only one female. To examine whether the online celebrity was considered thin, participants in the thin-image group assessed the figure's perceived thinness from 1 = *extremely heavy* to 10 = *extremely thin* (M = 8.73, SD = 1.09). Forty-five, product-only pictures were set as a baseline control group. These product-only images displayed one common household object in each picture, such as a bucket, flat iron, hanger, or brush, with no people included.

Measures

Body appreciation. Body appreciation was measured using the Body Appreciation Scale — 2 (BAS-2; Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015), comprising 10 items (e.g., 'I respect my body') that are rated from 1 = *never* to 5 = *always*. Participants' scores on the 10 items were averaged, and higher scores indicate greater body appreciation.

Weight satisfaction. Weight satisfaction was measured on a 10-point scale (1 = *not at all satisfied*, 10 = *very satis*fied). Participants indicated their current level of satisfaction and dissatisfaction (reverse-scored) with their weight (Boyce & Kuijer, 2014). Participants' responses to the two items were averaged, and higher scores indicate greater weight satisfaction.

Self-objectification. Self-objectification was measured using the Self-Objectification Questionnaire (SOQ; Noll & Fredrickson, 1998). Participants ranked five appearance attributes (e.g., weight) and five competence attributes (e.g., muscular strength), depending on how important they are to their physical self-concept. Each attribute was given a score from 0 (*least important*) to 9 (*most important*). Scores were computed by summing the ranks for appearance and competence attributes separately, and then the score of competence attributes was subtracted from the score of appearance attributes. Final scores range from

−25 to 25, and higher scores indicate higher levels of self-objectification.

Food intake. Food intake was measured during the 10-minute exposure to the selected images. Participants received a large glass of water and two bowls of unhealthy food: chocolate M&Ms and bite-sized cookies. The participants were told they could eat as much of the snack foods as they wanted while viewing the pictures. Each bowl was weighed before and after the food intake phase, and the grams consumed from each bowl were calculated and converted into calories (Evers, Marijn Stok, & de Ridder, 2010). Calories consumed from the M&Ms and cookies were added together to represent total unhealthy food consumption.

Covariates. Participants reported their age, weight (kilogram), height (metre) and hunger prior to the image exposure phase. Participants' weight and height were used to calculate their body mass index (BMI), which is defined as the weight divided by the square of the height (Anschutz, Engels, Becker, & Van, 2008). Participants rated their current level of hunger from 1= *not hungry* to 10 = *extremely hungry* (Boyce & Kuijer, 2014). Age, hunger, and BMI were set as potential covariates in this study to eliminate their influences on results.

Procedure

This research was approved by the university's ethics committee. Participants were recruited by an advertisement on campus for a research study concerning WeChat use.

First, participants signed an informed consent sheet and finished items concerning their age, weight, height, and hunger, and then they were randomly assigned to the thin images group or the control group (Graph Pad Software, 2017). Next, participants logged into their WeChat account and the researcher friended them with a fake profile. Two sets of pictures used in this study had already been posted on the two fake WeChat accounts respectively. Therefore, participants found that their new friend's WeChat account featured either thin-ideal images or product-only images. The researcher asked the participants to browse the pictures on their new friend's WeChat account for 10 minutes. During this period, participants could eat the food offered as much as they wanted. The researcher also told the participants that they should pay close attention to and keep viewing the pictures posted on their new friend's WeChat account because they would answer questions about their new friend afterwards. Once participants started viewing the images, the researcher left the room until the 10-minute period was finished. No participants in the thin-image group reported that they knew the woman in these pictures. After the image-viewing period, all participants completed measures of body appreciation, weight satisfaction, and self-objectification. In addition, participants in the thin-image group completed the measure of perceived thinness of their new friend. Lastly, participants received a 16G U-disk for

participation. The researcher calculated how much food participants took in during the 10-minute image-viewing period.

Results

There were no group differences for age, hunger, or BMI (ps > .05), indicating that randomisation was successful in creating similar groups.

Body appreciation, weight satisfaction, self-objectification, and food intake were analysed as dependent variables in separate ANCOVAs, with Group (thin-image vs. control) as the independent variable. Participants' age, hunger, and BMI were included as covariates. For all analyses, age and hunger were nonsignificant covariates (ps > .05), and were thereby removed from the models.

For body appreciation, the analyses revealed a significant effect of BMI, $F(1, 61) = 3.75$, $p = .03$, $\eta p^2 = .07$, and a non-significant effect of Group, $F(1, 61) = 1.34$, $p = .26$, $\eta p^2 = .03$.

For weight satisfaction, the analyses revealed a significant Group effect, $F(1, 61) = 3.56$, $p = .03$, $\eta p^2 = .07$, and a significant BMI effect, $F(1, 61) = 7.71$, $p = .007$, $\eta p^2 = .08$. Post hoc analysis indicated that the thin images group had significantly less weight satisfaction than the control group, $p < .05$.

For self-objectification, similarly, the analyses revealed a significant effect of Group, $F(1, 61) = 9.73$, $p = .002$, $\eta p^2 = .09$, and a significant effect of BMI, $F(1, 61) = 4.41$, $p = .003$, $\eta p^2 = .08$. Post hoc analysis revealed that the thin images group experienced significantly higher self-objectification than the control group, $p < .01$.

For food intake, the analyses revealed a significant effect of Group, $F(1, 62) = 6.57$, $p = .002$, $\eta p^2 = .12$, and a non-significant effect of BMI, $F(1, 62) = 1.13$, $p = .32$, $\eta p^2 = .02$. Post hoc analysis suggested that the thin images group had significantly more unhealthy food than the control group, $p < .01$.

Discussion

As predicted, women exposed to thin images on social media had lower weight satisfaction and higher self-objectification, and took in more unhealthy food. Contrary to prediction, the thin images group did not show lower body appreciation relative to the control group. Such results were generally consistent with previous research that indicated that thin-ideal images on social media threatened women's body image (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2015), and increased disordered eating in non-clinical samples (Mabe et al., 2014; Smith et al., 2013).

However, in contrast to existing literature, the present research proposed that such negative effects could not be entirely attributed to upward shape-related comparison, which is the focus of research in thin media images. In fact, most of thin images on social media are of beautiful, successful, and rich people. Ordinary people may

also suffer from upward SES-related comparison when viewing these images. Therefore, the present research hypothesised that although comparison with thin images with high-perceived SES is definitely harmful, it may not be very detrimental to make comparison with thin images with parallel-perceived SES. The present research then conducted another experiment to compare the effects of thin images with parallel-perceived SES and thin images with high-perceived SES and a baseline control condition on women's body image and unhealthy food intake.

STUDY 2
Method
Participants

Participants were 159 women (n high-perceived SES = 53; n parallel-perceived SES = 53; n control = 53) between 19 and 26 years old (M age = 20.49, SD = 2.05) with BMI between 18.92 and 24.67 (M BMI = 21.67, SD = 2.24). The participants were undergraduates and postgraduates at East China Normal University, who maintained a WeChat account.

Tools

WeChat was used to expose participants to two sets of thin images and product-only control images.

Materials

Two sets of thin-ideal images and one set of control images. Study 2 used the same set of thin images as Study 1 for the materials for thin images with high-perceived SES group, as all of these pictures showed luxurious accessories. Furthermore, Study 2 retrieved another pool of 45 thin female images with parallel-perceived SES via a Baidu image search. These pictures also featured only one female and were collected from an ordinary woman (i.e., as distinct from the female in the high-perceived SES pictures), whose pictures contained no luxurious accessories. The same product-only pictures from Study 1 were again used in this study for the baseline control group.

Measures

Measures of body appreciation, weight satisfaction, self-objectification, and food intake were identical to those in Study 1.

Subjective social status (SSS) and perceived SES of thin images. Subjective social status (SSS) was measured with the Subjective SES Scale (Adler, Epel, Castellazzo, & Ickovics, 2000). Participants were given the drawing of a ladder with 10 rungs that was described as follows:

> *Think of this ladder as representing where people stand in our society. At the top of the ladder are the people who are the best off — they have the most money, the most education, and the most respected jobs. At the bottom of the ladder are the people who are the worst off — they have the least money, the least education, and the least respected jobs or no job. Where would*

Table 1

Demographic and Descriptive Data for the Two Thin-Image and One Control Groups

	High perceived SES group (n = 53) M (SD)	Parallel-perceived SES group (n = 53) M (SD)	Control group (n = 53) M (SD)
BMI	21.64 (2.32)	22.18 (2.09)	21.20 (1.95)
SSS	6.53 (1.21)	6.27 (1.16)	6.64 (1.33)
Body appreciation	3.51 (1.12)	3.91 (.94)	3.87 (.98)
Weight satisfaction	5.69 (1.47)	6.34 (1.23)	6.26 (1.06)
Self-objectification	8.78 (1.15)	− 2.71 (1.39)	− 6.46 (1.22)
Food intake (calories)	532 (37.62)	226 (24.48)	257 (26.84)

Note: Scores for self-objectification range from −25 to 25.

you place yourself on this ladder, with 10 being the highest and 1 being the lowest?

Scores range from 1 to 10, with higher scores representing higher SSS. Participants' SSS ranged from 3 to 8 ($M = 6.48$, $SD = 1.43$), meaning that all participants perceived that they had a middle level of SES (Cardel et al., 2012).

Measurement of perceived SES of thin images used the same item as the SSS, by changing the last sentence to 'Where would you place your new WeChat friend on this ladder?'

The Subjective SES Scale has been shown to be significantly associated with objective SES, health-related variables (e.g., waist-to-hip ratio, sleep latency, and heart rate), and psychological variables (e.g., chronic stress, negative affect, pessimism, and perceived control over life), which turns out to be a validated scale (Adler et al., 2000).

Procedure

The procedure of Study 2 remained the same in Study 1.

Manipulation check. To ensure the woman in the thin-ideal images was a complete stranger to the participants, the researcher asked the participants whether they knew their new friend (the thin image) when they received the friending request from her on WeChat. Exclusion from the study would be applied to anyone who knew the woman on the thin images; however, no participant needed to be excluded from further analysis.

To examine whether the two groups of thin images were similar in other aspects, except for perceived SES, participants in the two thin-image groups assessed the figure's thinness (1 = *extremely heavy* to 10 = *extremely thin*), attractiveness (1 = *extremely unattractive* to 10 = *extremely attractive*), and perceived SES (1 = *extremely low* to 10 = *extremely high*). Then the thinness, attractiveness, and perceived SES of the two sets of thin images were compared. An ANOVA revealed a significant main effect for perceived SES, $F(1, 104) = 22.78$, $p < .001$, $\eta p^2 = .19$, and high-perceived SES images were indeed rated more highly ($M = 8.71$; $SD = 1.49$) than parallel-perceived SES images ($M = 6.55$; $SD = 1.62$) on SES. However, no significant main effects were found for thinness, $F(1, 104) = 1.17$, $p = .33$, $\eta p^2 = .02$, and for attractiveness, $F(1, 104) = .51$, $p = .69$, $\eta p^2 = .01$, which suggested that participants believed the two sets of thin images have a similar level of thinness and attractiveness.

To examine whether participants exposed to thin images with high-perceived SES will make upward SES-related comparison, and participants exposed to thin images with parallel-perceived SES will make lateral SES-related comparison, participants' SSS and perceived SES of two sets of thin images were compared respectively. In the thin images with parallel-perceived SES group, there was no significant difference between participants' SSS ($M = 6.27$, $SD = 1.16$) and perceived SES ($M = 6.55$; $SD = 1.62$) of thin images ($t = 0.84$, $p > .05$). In the thin images with high-perceived SES group, participants' SSS ($M = 6.53$, $SD = 1.21$) was significantly lower than perceived SES ($M = 8.71$; $SD = 1.49$) of thin images ($t = 4.42$, $p < .001$). Therefore, participants made SES-related comparison with these thin images in the proposed directions.

Results

Table 1 presents participants' demographic and psychological data. There were no group differences concerning BMI or SSS ($ps > .05$), indicating that randomisation was successful in creating similar groups.

Body appreciation, weight satisfaction, self-objectification, and food intake were set as dependent variables and were analysed in separate ANCOVAs, with Group (high-perceived SES vs. parallel-perceived SES vs. control) set as the independent variable. Participants' BMI and SSS were included as covariates.

For body appreciation, the analyses revealed a significant effect of BMI, $F(2, 155) = 3.48$, $p = .04$, $\eta p^2 = .07$, a non-significant effect of SSS, $F(2, 155) = .07$, $p = .79$, $\eta p^2 = .001$, and a non-significant effect of Group, $F(2, 155) = 2.23$, $p = .11$, $\eta p^2 = .04$.

For weight satisfaction, similarly, the analyses revealed a significant BMI effect, $F(2, 155) = 4.61$, $p = .01$, $\eta p^2 = .06$, a non-significant Group effect, $F(2, 155) = 1.51$, $p = .22$, $\eta p^2 = .03$, and a non-significant SSS effect, $F(2, 155) = .23$, $p = .68$, $\eta p^2 = .005$.

For self-objectification, the analyses revealed a significant Group effect, $F(2, 155) = 6.74$, $p < .001$, $\eta p^2 = .12$, and a significant SSS effect, $F(2, 155) = 3.72$, $p = .02$, $\eta p^2 = .08$. However, the effect of BMI was non-significant, $F(2, 155) = 1.60$, $p = .21$, $\eta p^2 = .02$.

Post hoc analysis suggested that the parallel-perceived SES group experienced lower self-objectification than that of the high-perceived SES group, $p < .001$, but higher than the control group, $p < .01$. The high-perceived SES group had higher self-objectification than that of the control group, $p < .001$.

For food intake, the analyses revealed a significant effect of Group, $F(2, 156) = 6.62$, $p = .002$, $\eta p^2 = .11$, a non-significant effect of BMI, $F(2, 156) = 0.99$, $p = .37$, $\eta p^2 = .002$, and a non-significant effect of SSS, $F(2, 156) = 1.97$, $p = .14$, $\eta p^2 = .03$.

Post hoc analysis indicated that the parallel-perceived SES group had significantly less unhealthy food than the high-perceived SES group, $p < .001$, and took in approximately the same amount of unhealthy food as the control group, $p > .05$. In addition, the high-perceived SES group had more unhealthy food than the control group, $p < .001$.

Discussion

Study 2 provided causal evidence for the assumption that SES-related comparison is a noteworthy factor in thin media images research. In Study 2, participants exposed to thin images with parallel-perceived SES on social media had lower self-objectification and less unhealthy food compared to participants exposed to thin images with high-perceived SES. Such findings indicated that SES is, to some extent, a more influential social comparison dimension than shape for women exposed to pervasive thin images on social media. However, given that no group differences were found for body appreciation and weight satisfaction, caution must be taken in interpreting the effects of SES-related and shape-related comparison on women's body image concerns.

General Discussion

For eating behaviour, the results of Study 1 indicated that thin images on social media could elevate women's unhealthy food intake. However, such results may be partly attributed to upward SES-related comparison with thin images. Shedding light on the perceived SES of thin images, Study 2 found that women exposed to thin images with parallel-perceived SES had significantly less unhealthy food than women exposed to thin images with high-perceived SES, and had nearly the same amount of unhealthy food as the control group. These findings suggest that after removing the undesirable effect of upward SES-related comparison, upward shape-related comparison barely influences women's food intake. In other words, SES rather than body shape turns out to be a more influential predictor for women's eating behaviour in the present research. Our findings concur with previous evidence concerning the associations between uncontrolled eating and SES (Dykes, Brunner, Martikainen, & Wardle, 2004; Pigeyre et al., 2012; Pigeyre et al., 2016), and further emphasise the importance of SES in the thin media images research.

For body image, both studies illustrated that shape-related and SES-related comparison with thin images on social media had no impact on women's body appreciation. The effects of shape/SES-related comparison on women's weight satisfaction remained mixed, as Study 1 indicated that thin images on social media had a negative influence on weight satisfaction, while no significant differences in weight satisfaction were found across the thin images with high-perceived SES group, the thin images with parallel-perceived SES group, and the control group in Study 2. Moreover, the two studies suggest that shape-related and SES-related upward comparison with thin images heightens women's self-objectification. Taken together, whether shape/SES-related comparison with thin images has detrimental effects on women's body image depends on specific body image indicators. Although it appears that exposure to thin media images generally has an adverse effect on female body image (Groesz et al., 2002), results have been contradictory (e.g., Halliwell, Dittmar, & Howe, 2005; Joshi, Herman, & Polivy, 2004), and effect sizes are small and heavily contingent on specific measures and characteristics of the participants (Groesz et al., 2002). Our findings also concur with previous work suggesting that the relationship between SES and women's body image is inconsistent (e.g., Maruf et al., 2014), with some studies reporting an association (Paxton, Sculthorpe, & Gibbons, 1994; Wardle & Marsland, 1990) and some reporting no association (Thomas & Andreas, 2012; O'Dea, 1994). In conclusion, our findings suggest that whether shape/SES-related comparison with thin media images has detrimental effects on women's body image remains an issue to be explored.

Results of the present research have theoretical implications for literature in thin media images and social comparison theory. Our findings are contradictory to the previous research in thin media images, which emphasises that shape-related comparison with thin ideals has harmful effects on women's body image, psychological wellbeing and eating behaviour (e.g., Groez et al., 2002; Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2007). By taking SES-related comparison into consideration, our results clarify that it is not the thin body but the relatively high-perceived SES of the image that does harm to women. Previous research may oversimplify the nature of thin images displayed and transmitted on social media, and perceived SES is a factor worthy of attention in this research area. Moreover, our results have expanded the realm of social comparison theory by indicating that some comparison dimensions are more important than others for a certain group. These findings lead us to reconsider what is actually important to contemporary young women. Researchers used to believe that women are appearance focused, while men are occupation focused (Haferkamp & Krämer, 2011). However, our findings suggest that women tend to have more unhealthy food when they make upward SES-related comparison rather than upward shape-related comparison with thin images on social media.

It should be noted that a limitation of present work is that this research was only carried out in predominantly normal weight and middle-SES young women, so results may not be generalisable to the whole population. Therefore, these analyses should be considered exploratory, and results should be considered preliminary and not yet definitive. The second limitation is that the present research measured food intake during the thin image viewing period (prior to body image measurement) to be a realistic reflection of real-world eating behaviour, whereas some previous research suggested that body image concern was a trigger for eating disturbance (Stice, 2002). Third, participants' body weight and height were self-reported (not measured), which could bring bias to BMI and influence the results of certain body image indicators associated with BMI. Therefore, although these findings are promising, future research is needed to draw firm conclusions.

Additional directions for future research pertain to exploring the underlying mechanisms of the present findings. It should incorporate potential mediators, such as engaging in social comparison (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2015), and plausible moderators, such as body image coping strategies (Cash, Santos, & Williams, 2005), to investigate the process in which and for whom these findings hold.

Conclusion

In conclusion, although previous research in thin media images asserted that shape-related comparison to thin images endangered women's body image and eating behaviour, the present research clarifies that it is not the shape-related comparison but the SES-related comparison with thin images that really has an adverse effect on women's eating behaviour. The effects of shape/SES-related comparison with thin images on women's body image indicators remain mixed and have to be further investigated.

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